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ABSTRACT

This document describes Even Start, a new federal family literacy program that combines early childhood education, parenting education, and adult literacy education. The program is based on the collaboration of community organizations and provides a new range of services. These services include family-centered education programs that involve parents and children in a cooperative effort to help parents become full partners in the education of their children. The program was first funded in 1989, and funding levels are increasing to match public interest. This document outlines the parameters of the program, including authorizing legislation, criteria for eligibility, the nature of services, funding, and an evaluation of the program. Appended are four references. (GLR)

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Off to A Good Start With Even Start!

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Abstract

With funding levels increasing to match public interest, Even Start marks a new phase in interagency cooperation to deliver a unique combination of early childhood education, parenting education, and adult literacy education. The parameters of this new program are outlined, to include authorizing legislation, eligible participants, nature of the services, funding, and evaluation.

Off to a Good Start

With Even Start!

What do you get if you combine sound early childhood education with sound parenting education with sound adult literacy education? Even Start, a unique federal program which seeks to give both parent and child an "even start" on the road to lifelong learning. Now in its third funding year, the Even Start Family Literacy program has grown from 76 programs in FY 89 (with federal appropriation of $14.5 million) to approximately 230 programs for FY 91 (49.7 million). Current budget requests call for a 20% funding increase for FY 92 to a funding level of $60 million (MacDonald, 1991), at which time the program becomes state administered under Chapter I.

The program was born amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, under the Hawkins Stafford Elementary and Secondary Improvement Amendments of 1988 (P.L. 100-297). These amendments authorize a new program under Part B of Chapter 1 of Title 1 of the ESEA:

> It is the purpose of this part to improve the educational opportunities of the Nation's children and adults by integrating early childhood education and adult education for parents into a unified program to be referred to as 'Even Start.' The program shall be implemented through cooperative projects that build on existing community

> resources to create a new range of services. (P.L. 100-297, Sec. 1051)

Unlike federal programs which authorize and then create entirely new delivery systems from the ground up, Even Start is meant to be collaborative, to link together resources into a new delivery network. The authorizing legislation elaborates the intended range of "existing community resources":

> local educational agencies, in collaboration with, where appropriate, institutions, the appropriate state educational agency, or other appropriate nonprofit organization;

as well as the nature of the "new range of services":

> family-centered education programs which involve parents and children in a cooperative effort to help parents become full partners in the education of their children and to assist children in reaching their full potential as learners. (Sec. 1054 (a))

To further underscore the cooperative nature and local "ownership," grant monies are awarded for an initial period not to exceed four years, with the federal share decreasing by 10% annually from 90% the first year to 60% in the fourth and any subsequent year. As federal dollars decrease, local monies, especially in the form of "in kind" services from existing agencies, proportionally increase.

The authorizing legislation clearly spells out the tripartite

Even Start mission: promoting "adult literacy, training parents to support the educational growth of their children and preparation of children for success in regular school programs." (Sec. 1054(b)(4)) Eligible participants include:

> (a) a parent or parents who are eligible for participation in an adult basic education program under the Adult Education Act [for all practical purposes, a parent with functional literacy below high school level]; and
>
> (b) the child or children, (aged birth to 7, inclusive), of any individual under paragraph (1), who reside in a school attendance area designated for participation in programs under part A [i.e., Chapter 1 eligible]. (Sec. 1055)

What do Even Start programs look like? Even a cursory review of program abstracts yields the unmistakable conclusion that each of the some 230 currently funded programs is unique. Some have adapted all or part of nationally-recognized models such as those of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation and the National Center for Family Literacy (established through the Kenan Charitable Trust Fund), while others have designed their own delivery systems from the ground up to meet particular local needs. The all-encompassing rural/urban scope of the Even Start mission has led many programs to multi-site and/or mobile unit design.

With almost as many program designs as there are programs, it becomes critical to know exactly what individual programs do look like, especially as funding and interest grows and communities seek to address their own needs by local design. A longer-range benefit of these descriptive data would be the identification and dissemination through the National Diffusion Network of models "that work." Indeed, of the four basic research questions identified for national Even Start evaluation, three focus on the broad agenda of descriptive information: participant demographics, program parameters, and client services. (St. Pierre, Swartz, Nickse, & Goodson, 1990)

Based upon preliminary analysis of the descriptive data received from 71 to 73 first-year (initial funding in FY '89) projects reporting, certain characteristics of Even Start programs are beginning to emerge. Preschool programming by Even Start in conjunction with local cooperating agencies accounts for almost one-half of all early childhood educational services, almost twice that of both kindergarten and primary programs. At least three-fourths of the reporting programs (again, in conjunction with cooperating agencies) facilitate the following categories of parent-child activity: reading, readiness, social development, numbers, arts and crafts, gross motor, writing, and health and nutrition. Slightly more than half of the reporting programs provide transportation and custodial childcare on their own, while between half and three-fourths operate on a year-round basis. (RMC

Research Corporation, 1991)

Does Even Start work? This is the second broad research agenda identified for analysis, and the jury (as well as the data) is still out. The current research design calls for each program to administer the Preschool Inventory (PSI) to children aged three and four, together with the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-Revised (PRVT-R) for ages three through seven. In addition, ten sites will be selected for in-depth study, to include client randomization to either treatment or control. (St. Pierre et al., 1990)

Despite the formative nature of program evaluation to this point, anecdotal evidence does indicate positive results about the program from both participants and staff. In one program an exuberant young parent accompanied the teachers to lunch, saw a fried, and recruited her on the spot! In another program the participants, both adults and children, planned, prepared, and executed a "graduation" party (complete with cake and trimmings) for a mother who passed her GED examinations. This level of enthusiasm appears typical and serves to underscore the belief that parents truly want what is best for themselves and their children. As the family goes so goes the nation, and it is comforting to know that some families will be getting an Even Start.

REFERENCES

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